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Life in the Convent



In 1947, when Sister Betsy¹ was seventeen years old, she took her vows with a few dozen other girls between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. Dressed as Christ's bride in a simple white gown, she prostrated herself on the cool gray marble floor, symbolizing her death to the outside world; after this day she would no longer be the master of her own destiny. She would no longer make decisions about where to live or whom to spend time with. She would no longer be known by the name she had been given at birth, Evelyn. From now on she would use the name the Mother Superior had given her: Sister Elizabeth, or Betsy. When she took her vows she understood "a little bit about life" in the convent because she had grown up near it and been educated by the sisters who lived there. She joined because she wanted to "do something hard for God" in gratitude for all that God had done for her, adding, "I knew we couldn't go home. I gave up that, so I gave up a lot. We couldn't go home, we couldn't write all the letters we wanted to write. We couldn't eat when we wanted to, it had to be a special time or something like that. So all those things put together, made it . . . made it . . . I knew what I was getting into, and but I still wanted to do it. And, I just stressed the words, uh, *something hard for God*."

Sister Betsy grew up in what she described as a happy family. She was the middle child, with two older brothers and two younger sisters. Her family lived close enough to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent that she could see its chapel steeple from her home. She told me that, as a child, when she looked at the convent she could see herself inside its red brick walls. She said, "I loved God, I just loved Him so much." She said she knew the break from her family

would be hard. Her family drove her to the convent with the items she was required to bring—among them sensible shoes, socks, and a woolen habit.

As a novice in the convent, Sister Betsy rose before dawn for morning prayers and prayed scripted words at prescribed times throughout the day. She was taught that when she washed she should recite “Crucified Jesus, cleanse me from sin through thy precious blood flowing from Thy sacred wounds.” When getting dressed, she recited a prayer for each piece of the habit she put on. As she tied the girdle, she recited “Jesus, my beloved spouse, unite me so closely to Thee that I may remain Thy faithful bride forever.” Each word, even in her silent prayers, was proscribed by the convent authorities. As she did her chores in the kitchen and swept the halls, she was not to chat with her peers but rather to silently recite scripted prayers.

She memorized prayers, which she would learn to speak aloud throughout the day. Novices were taught that these prayers should take the place of idle thoughts or chatter. Sister Betsy’s contemporary, Sister Agnes Marie, described working in the convent kitchen peeling potatoes with other young sisters. The sisters were not allowed to make conversation with each other; instead they were to repeat short prayers called ejaculations or aspirations, designed to be memorized and repeated throughout the day.

Sister Agnes Marie described a moment when she was working with other young sisters in the kitchen: “We would recite ejaculations hour after hour. We had a potato peeler, this big thing where the potatoes rolled around, but we novices after breakfast and after prayer had to eye the potatoes. We didn’t chat and giggle. We eyed the potatoes with ejaculations. So, someone would begin an ejaculation, ‘May Jesus have mercy on us,’ and then everyone would continue that until someone else began a new one.”

Eventually Sister Betsy worked and lived outside the convent, first as a grade school teacher and later as a nurse. At the end of each school year she would pack her meager belongings in a wooden trunk and return to the convent. She would sit with more than six hundred other sisters on wooden pews in the cool air of the chapel until she was handed a slip of paper with her “obedience” written on it. Only then would she know if she was to return to the rural schoolhouse where she taught grade school or if she would be sent to a new school, a different position—or, perhaps, as a missionary, she might be sent abroad.

When I met Sister Betsy she had already served nearly seven decades in the convent. At the time we met, she spent her days sitting in a plush blue recliner in her small room in the convent infirmary. She had back trouble and was in constant pain. Her sisters, the other nuns, would come to her room throughout the day to hold her hand, pray and sing hymns with her, and deliver Holy Communion. Despite the chronic pain, she was full of life. Her body was hunched and crooked and she was plagued with spinal pain that would only worsen with time, but her laughter rang with unbridled merriment as she told

me, “I know God loves me. But not just because I’m a sister. He loves me because He made me; He created me. And God is love. And He’s wonderful to me.”

In the beginning I had no idea what it would feel like to live in a convent. I had spent much of my first year as a doctoral student at the University of California–Los Angeles trying to secure access to conduct research in a Catholic convent, and in the end it had been my Jewish grandmother’s casual remark, “I know a nun,” that led me to Sister Angelica and to the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart.² I had never before set foot in a convent.

The week before my trip, I attended Mass at the beautiful Saint Monica Catholic Church in Santa Monica, California. I was a bit anxious, convinced I would be exposed immediately as an outsider. I remember taking in the massive white marble walls and the glowing gold murals of Jesus and the saints and trying my best to rise and sit, to kneel and stand in rhythm with everyone else. When it was time for Communion, I followed the line of congregants to the edge of the altar where, one by one, parishioners received the Communion wafers. As I recognized the ritual unfolding before me, my heart started to pound. I knew that Catholics considered the Communion wafer to be a holy sacrament, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Having beforehand scoured all of the introduction to Catholicism literature I could find (including a black and yellow copy of *Catholicism for Dummies*), I understood that in the eyes of Catholics, to take Communion without being a baptized Catholic would be a sin. I inched closer and closer as the priest placed the Eucharist in each congregant’s open palms and silently panicked. How could I avoid the impending placement of the Eucharist on my hands? How could I communicate that I am not Catholic? How could I avoid disrupting the sacred silence that filled the chapel? Why was I so stupid as to follow everyone out of the pew? Should I just run out of line? I felt naïve, panicked, and deeply out of place. Months later, at Sister Betsy’s convent, I knew how to rise and sit in tempo with the nuns, how to quietly cross my arms over my chest at the altar so the priest knew to offer me a blessing instead of Communion. As the rituals became familiar to me, I would occasionally find myself quietly laughing at my first humiliating experience of Communion, grateful that my singular test run and awkward encounter occurred in Santa Monica, far from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent.

Arriving at the Convent

When I landed at the small Midwestern airport for my first visit in 2008, Sister Angelica, who knew my grandmother from her time in New York, met me at baggage claim. She wore blue slacks and a white blouse. I identified her by the large silver cross she had told me would be pinned to her collar. Soon I would learn that to anyone in this part of the Midwest, the silver cross with a relief of

the crucified Christ signaled that the wearer was a sister in the community. Sister Angelica wrapped me in a huge hug and a warm smile. I felt relieved to have recognized her, yet still anxious about our journey to the convent.

Sister Angelica walked me to the curb, where I met a second nun. Sister Paula had taken time from her work in the convent's archives to drive Sister Angelica to the airport. They had signed out one of the convent's modest "community cars" weeks before for the event of my arrival. In a few moments I found myself, the daughter of a Jewish father and a nonpracticing Catholic mother from New England, sailing down a highway in a small car on a humid June day to a Catholic convent with two nuns I had just met. We were on our way to the motherhouse, the central convent where all of the sisters had been trained as novices and where they returned for holidays and retired after they could no longer work.

From my place in the back seat, I watched the small city recede and the countryside emerge, revealing increasingly varied shades of green as we drove to the convent. The car rose and sank over small hills, passing field after field of calf-high corn, handfuls of lazy spotted cows, and the occasional farmhouse and sundrenched red barn. The green was interrupted on occasion by a massive parking lot yawning against a big box store. I was struck by how different this part of the country was from the places I had lived (the Northeast, California, and Arizona). Many people were farmers, with roughened faces and faded jeans. Billboards on the highway advertised pro-life messages asserting "Abortion Is Murder," and waves of corn nodded across the horizon.

After an hour we turned off the two-lane highway and drove over gently sloping green hills past modest homes, family farms, and fields of corn. At the top of one hill, Sister Angelica whispered, "Look, look. Just through the tops of those trees you can see the spires of the convent church." She told me that each year at Christmas, when she returned to the motherhouse from her position teaching in New York, she would eagerly anticipate seeing the spires, the sign that she had arrived "home." As we descended into a small valley, the spires became prominent, looming like protective parents over the sleepy town.

Nestled in its small town, the convent felt removed from the bustle of the outside world. Only six hundred people, including the sisters, live in the almost entirely Catholic town.³ Two of the town's residents are priests; one serves the convent community, and the other serves the town church, which stands only a block away.

Inside the Convent

The motherhouse and its adjoining buildings were built to house over six hundred nuns. Now, the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart number only 250. More than half of these women work outside the convent as teachers,

missionaries, or administrators. The convent houses over one hundred retired nuns, ranging in age from their seventies to their nineties, along with a few centenarians, all of whom returned from their work to retire in the convent. They now live full-time in the convent, where they have access to nursing care if they need it.

The nuns are both of this place and separate from it. They have far more education than most in the surrounding community; they are more likely than their neighbors to have traveled, whether for work, on pilgrimages, or as missionaries to Native American communities, China, or Oceania. Many of the nuns are far more politically liberal than people in the surrounding community, actively supporting social causes for peace, justice, and tolerance. Both before and after retirement, many of the sisters worked with local immigrants, with migrant workers, in prisons, and with people in rural and urban areas struggling with poverty.

Most of the sisters joined the convent as sixteen- to nineteen-year-old girls. In life history interviews I conducted with thirty-one of the nuns, most of them described having a meaningful relationship with at least one sister from the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart community as they were growing up. The majority of the sisters went to Catholic school, and many told me that as adolescents they desired to emulate the sisters who had taught them.

Sister Carline's story is exemplary of many of these narratives. She told me about her admiration for a sister who taught her in elementary school:

I was taught by one of the Sisters of Charity and I really loved her and all sisters. And even at that time, in my little mind, I wanted to be like that, I wanted to be like her. And then as time went on, I put it in the back of my head. I dated and did all the things you're supposed to do as you're growing up and going to high school, going to games and all that. Then we moved [here]⁴ and I had the Franciscan sisters. And I really loved them too. There was just something drawing me to them.

Ultimately, one of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart who taught Sister Carline in high school took her to visit the convent, and by that Christmas she had decided to join.

Sister Genevieve told a similar story. When I asked her what it was about religious life that had attracted her, she replied, "I think it was that the sisters were happy. They were excellent teachers, and I liked to study and I wanted to be a teacher. And so I was attracted to that, I think, because of their example and because I wanted to be like them." The themes that emerge in the nuns' stories about why they joined the convent highlight many mainstream American cultural values. The common themes of individual choice, happiness, personal fulfillment, and life satisfaction, for example, crosscut most of the sisters'

narratives. Sister Genevieve said that the reasons she joined were not the same as the reasons she stayed; while she joined because she wanted to emulate the happiness and joy she saw in her teachers, she stayed because of the social bonds. When I asked her to expand on that, she said, “One [reason] is the bonding you get in religious life. Religious life is a family. I love it here. But also it’s a real commitment to the life. Commitment to the vows, and a commitment to just living in community.”

As Franciscans, the nuns see themselves as the “heart of the Church,” emphasizing Saint Francis’s and Saint Clare’s teachings of contemplation, peacemaking, poverty, care for the poor, and care for the earth. More than once I heard the metaphor that Jesuits are the “brain of the Church” while Franciscans are its heart. The sisters see themselves as committed to prayer, presence, and service. Saint Francis, the founder of the Franciscan order, wanted, in Sister Angelica’s words, all people to “be fools for Christ; live a life of joy that results in peace.” As Franciscans, the sisters strive to foster Saint Francis’s doctrine of peace, joy, and love through Christ.

The sisters described a powerful sense of love and gratitude for God and what they perceived God had already given them. For example, Sister Betsy, an elderly nun confined to her room as a result of severe back pain, described feeling overwhelmingly grateful for her life. She said that she had a “happy family life” and told me that she had joined the convent because she “wanted to do something hard for God.” She wanted to serve God as an expression of gratitude for what she understood herself to have received in life.

Sister Angelica echoed this notion of gratitude and giving back: “I didn’t go to the convent to get something out of it. I wanted to give something *to* it. I wanted to work for God; I fell in love with working for God and his people. What a wonderful thing, to help people see value in loving and knowing God.”

When they joined the convent, most of the nuns understood that life there would be hard work. Most of them grew up in big families with many siblings and spent the hours before and after school working on their family farms, raising their younger siblings, and helping their mothers with housework. In these large Catholic families with four to fifteen children, it was expected that one or two of the children would join the Church as nuns or priests. Many of the nuns had brothers who had attended seminary, and a few had siblings in the convent with them. During my first few months at the convent, I met three sisters who had joined together and were in their late nineties. I also met a pair of identical twins who had joined together decades earlier and now lived next to each other in retirement.

Most of the nuns I spoke with told me that their parents accepted their decision to join the convent and seemed proud to have raised a child who would devote herself to the Church. Many saw the process of “giving” a son or daughter to the Church as a form of devotion. Only a few of the nuns discussed the

decision as difficult for their families. One of the sisters who described such a conflict with her parents had been an only child, something that was quite rare—especially in Catholic families in those days. She told me that her parents were heartbroken when she told them she wanted to become a sister, and suggested that this conflict might have arisen because she represented her parents' only opportunity to have grandchildren. Her parents tried to change her mind to prevent her from joining the convent, which she described as very difficult emotionally, but ultimately, she became a nun. In this story we can see the American cultural values of self-determination at play. As a young adult, this sister was able to determine her future independently. In the United States the cultural values of independence and self-determination were valued over her kinship obligations. The convent supported her and worked to reassure the disheartened parents that the young sister's choice was a good one.

In the 1940s and 1950s, when most of the nuns I worked with had entered the convent, adolescent Catholic Midwestern girls from farming families were rarely able to pursue degrees beyond high school. The convent provided an unusual opportunity for women to not only join a religious community but also continue their education. Most of the sisters completed a college degree, and many were asked by the convent authorities to complete master's or doctoral degrees so that they could teach in Catholic colleges and universities. Becoming a nun in the early twentieth century was a move that afforded American Catholic women a rare, socially acceptable alternative to marriage and motherhood.

Once they joined the convent, the nuns spent the first few years as postulants and then novices living in the novitiate building, a dormitory-like structure built in the 1950s on the convent property. There they received basic religious training under the supervision of the novice mistress.

In the Catholic Church, there are two types of religious orders women can join: one is an apostolic, or "active" order in which sisters, like the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart, work serving communities outside the convent walls. Technically these women are referred to in the Church as "women religious" or "sisters," not nuns; but the sisters in this community often used the word *nun* to describe themselves, and I have followed their conventions in this book. Apostolic sisters take three vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Nuns in contemplative orders, such as the Poor Clares and the Carmelites, take a fourth vow, a vow of enclosure, which is a commitment to live a cloistered life, praying and working inside the walls of their convents. Both communities see themselves as serving the world, contemplative nuns through prayer and service behind the walls of the convent, and apostolic nuns like the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart through both prayer and physical service in the world. Often the work contemplative nuns do inside the convent walls, work that often serves to sustain the convent financially, also serves others. This work

can include farming, authoring prayer books, or producing food items to sell, such as biscuits, cheese, or wafers for Communion. Both types of communities, apostolic and contemplative, see themselves as involved in care for and service to the world. The distinction is largely in their method—serving through physical presence or serving through cloistered prayer and work.

A convent represents an interesting contradiction, as nuns separate themselves from the world in order to serve in the world. They give up ties with family and friends in order to live in community with others and with God. As Giorgio Agamben writes in his work on Franciscan monasticism, “It can appear surprising that the monastic ideal, born as an individual and solitary flight from the world, should have given origin to a model of total communitarian life” (2013, 9). When they entered monastic convent life, the sisters symbolically “died” to the material world. They had to break ties with their families and give up the possibility of marrying, having children, or working in secular jobs. Yet as Agamben points out, this break from the world is not “an individual or solitary flight,” as it might have been centuries earlier. Franciscan sisters join a community of women with whom they share their physical and spiritual lives; in fact, rather than an individual or solitary existence, the nuns must negotiate shared spaces and communal living. Their lives in the convent may require far more social interaction than their lives before entering the convent did.

As they began life in the convent community, the sisters I met learned to live with their peers under a strictly regulated institutional structure. Each hour was scheduled, and meaning was ascribed to every action, from what they wore to how they moved. This strict schedule of prayer is designed to structure the day and also provide a moral structure for the nuns. According to Agamben, their daily prayers, the Liturgy of the Hours, provides “a sanctification by means of time” (2013, 29). Agamben suggests that the “strict absoluteness” of the regulation of time in monastic communities “has perhaps never been equaled in any institution in modernity” (2013, 19). The regulation of time represents a symbolic transformation for the nuns as they learn to live in a world where each moment is ordered and, through that order, rendered sacred. This is a cultural transformation as well. Time, which is differently ordered and regulated across cultural communities, is intertwined with moral meanings (Gingrich, Ochs, and Swedlund 2002). The nuns grew up in American Catholic homes where the day was divided into symbolic portions: work versus rest, the week versus the weekend, specific mealtimes; day versus night. As in any community, the division of time provided a symbolic organization to their world at home. In the convent this process is not only more strictly regulated but is also designed with an unparalleled level of detail and intentionality. Time regulation in the convent is meant to bring God’s presence into each moment in the day. The process of sanctification through a daily schedule is not only theoretical or propositional, having to do with what the nuns believe but, along with other

elements of the nuns' lives, is embodied, providing an experiential incarnation of sacred unity with the divine. Like the nuns' woolen habit, the institutionally assigned clothing that imbues their bodies with moral significance as a "sacred sign" (Agamben 2013, 17), the division of time is also meant to render each moment an opportunity to be in unity with the divine.

This external regulation is designed to shape the young women as they enter spiritual life. In her work on postulants in a Mexican convent, Rebecca Lester provides a psychological analysis of the process through which women entering a convent come to reshape their sense of self through the "self-conscious systematic use of bodily practices" (2005, 47). She explains, "As the postulants become habituated to the rigorous life of the convent, their bodies come to mediate between the interior sacred space of the soul and the exterior world of physical demands and temptations" (2005, 17). Lester suggests that through regimentation in the convent, the postulants she worked with felt that they changed: "They described to me a palpable sense of transformation, a feeling of becoming someone new, someone sacred. This did not mean, I learned, that the old self had been obliterated but rather that this self had become mobilized along a different trajectory" (2005, 19).

This process continues throughout the lives of the Franciscan Sisters I worked with. Behind the novitiate building, along the rolling green hills, there are rows and rows of silvery white headstones that grow smaller and smaller as they recede over a hill. It is in this cemetery that the nuns will eventually be buried with the sisters who have passed on to heaven before them. Once, as I proceeded with the sisters across the grassy lawns to the cemetery, one of them commented to me that she felt one could witness time passing by measuring the white rows of headstones; as each year passed, green fields blossomed into white crosses. Seeing the new rows of crosses advance across the hillside, the sister witnessed time creeping slowly before her, as if in a time-lapse scene in a movie. We might imagine that this, too, could be considered "a sanctification by means of time" (Agamben 2013, 29), albeit at a much slower pace. For as these crosses populated more and more of the hillside, representing the passing of time through the deaths of her peers, the sister saw time marked through the end of life and a final union with God. In the words of Sister Joan Chittister, a Catholic nun and prolific writer, for Catholics "life always comes out of death. The present rises from the ashes of the past" (2008, 19).

Convent History

The Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. A local pastor, seeing a need for community services, established a convent to serve his small Midwestern farming community. He wrote to a Franciscan community in western Europe, and a brave nun answered his call, moving across the world to a small log cabin in the Midwest to found a

religious community. The goal was to develop a convent of nuns who could provide schooling for local children and services for orphans who had survived a recent cholera outbreak. The first generation of nuns, a handful of hardworking women, expanded the log cabin into a stone building, established schools in the area, and ministered to local children. The town grew, and in subsequent decades the convent population expanded as well. The nuns established schools and extended their work to cities and towns throughout the Midwest.

In the 1960s, when many of the nuns who participated in my research were novices or young nuns, institutional change in the Catholic Church transformed their lives. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, set in motion changes that radically altered the lives of Catholic nuns around the world. These changes, which included the elimination of the habit, the restructuring of institutional rules, and a democratization of convent leadership, transformed the sisters' lives. For the first one hundred years of the convent's history, from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth, the sisters' lives had been relatively unchanged. They lived according to a set schedule, prayed the same words, and wore heavy woolen habits.

It is perhaps impossible to overstate how much of the nuns' lives and everyday practices changed during the massive social and historical shift that followed Vatican II. The nuns in the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart Community who were found to experience positive health outcomes as they aged had lived through this transformation. They grew up in a Vatican I Church and learned to be nuns in a Vatican I convent. They were socialized into a particular set of cultural practices and then took up a radically different set of cultural practices following Vatican II. During their lives, everything from the structure of the convent to the language of prayer was transformed. When we look at these sisters who have come to represent "successful aging" in the United States, and who report remarkable physical and psychological well-being, we are looking at a group of women at a very specific moment in time. To understand why these nuns experienced such well-being requires an examination of the sociohistorical circumstances that shaped their habitual practices before, during, and after this transition. As such, Vatican II plays a significant role in the story of these nuns' lives. We will return to it throughout the book.

The Twenty-First Century Franciscan Convent

When I arrived at the convent that day in June, the densely humid summer air was thick with the hum of insects and the smell of flowers and freshly mowed grass. As I stepped inside the convent, I was greeted by the cool relief of air-conditioning and the beauty of the marble steps and freshly waxed wood floors. A sense of calm permeated the space. As the seasons changed, the air outside turned crisp and the furnaces in the convent began to hum, rendering the enormous building almost startlingly warm. In the white, cold, winter months,



FIG. 1.1 A bedroom in the novitiate. (Photo by the author)

the heart of the convent warmed, smelling of freshly laundered hand-knit sweaters and baking bread.

The nun holding the title of congregational minister gave me permission to live in the novitiate building, which was situated across from the motherhouse facing a yard edged with flower beds. On the grounds there were spaces for prayer, benches facing grottos housing statues of Mary and Jesus, and a statue of Saint Francis, eternally feeding the birds, stood in front of the novitiate.

The novitiate was echoingly empty of novices; the building resembled a mirage of hope for a future that would never materialize. Built in the late 1960s, the two upper floors held rows of bedrooms and dormitory bathrooms with aquamarine and cream tiles and rows of showers behind pale green curtains. The expansive bedrooms (pictured in fig. 1.1) had been built as dorms with floor-to-ceiling wood-paneled closets lining the walls, built for the groups of novices meant to bunk together. The wide hallways and nearly vacant rooms spoke of a time when the community expected young women to join the convent in large numbers. When I was there, only a handful of retired nuns lived in the building, which had never welcomed the classes of novices for which it was designed.

The nuns who joined before the 1960s spoke to me of the kindness of the sisters who taught them and the opportunities behind the convent doors. The futures they described themselves leaving would have held marriages and motherhood. Entering the convent, the young sisters traded the excitement of

familial love and motherhood for a lifetime in a community dedicated to education, prayer, and hard work as teachers or nurses serving those in need.

In the 1960s, as American women began to have more opportunities to work outside of the home, the number of women joining Catholic convents, especially liberal communities like the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart, began to decline. In 2012, 80 percent of convents in the United States reported that they had no new novices and 14 percent reported that they had only one (Gautier and Saunders 2013, 6). Researchers at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University found that the number of women religious or apostolic sisters had fallen from 181,421 in 1966 to 49,883 in 2014 (Berrelleza, Gautier, and Gray 2014, 2). The Catholic Church has no official conclusion regarding why numbers have dwindled so dramatically, but the theory held by many of the sisters I spoke with was that there were now a number of opportunities through which Catholic women could gain higher education and participate in missionary or service work without joining a convent. They imagined that young women who felt the call to serve God could choose to volunteer in the Peace Corps or travel as missionary nurses without having to join a convent. The novices who did join the convent were much older than those who joined before Vatican II. As of 2012, the average age of women joining convents in the United States was thirty-nine (Gautier and Saunders 2013, 2), much older than the sixteen- to eighteen-year-old girls who joined in the first half of the twentieth century. In 2009, a National Religious Vocations Conference study found that that 91 percent of women religious, or apostolic sisters, were age sixty or older. Only 1 percent of apostolic sisters in the United States were under 40 years old (Bendyna and Gautier 2009, 27).

Sanctification through Presence

After a few days in the convent, I began to feel the rhythm of the place. In the summers my sleep would yield to the sounds of chattering birds and the quarter-hourly morning bells. I came to anticipate the voices of two sisters who passed under my window each morning before 5:30 a.m. As I showered and prepared for each day, I became aware of the quiet stirrings of a handful of retired sisters in their rooms in the novitiate as they awoke and sat in prayer. A few emerged to make tea at the shared kitchenette down the hall. Doors quietly opened and shut. The mornings were a time reserved for private prayer. Some of the nuns prayed in writing, using a daily prayer journal. Some read Franciscan prayer books. A few greeted the divine in the garden, walking the flower beds and fields, allowing the divine to emerge to them through the blades of grass and the wind. Most sat in their rooms in silent prayer.

At 6:30 a.m. many of the nuns would descend from their rooms and gather in the chapel. The slow cadence of metal walkers scraping the oak hall floors



FIG. 1.2 The convent chapel. (Photo by the author)

that led to the chapel signaled to me that it was gathering time. One could judge how late it was by the tempo of shoes and tapping canes; the pace of movement quickened as the time of the Mass approached, then fell to a hush as Mass began. In the minutes before this, the chapel echoed with the soft scrub of sensible shoes on the marble floor, the creaking of wooden pews, and the rustling of clothes as the sisters crossed the center of the chapel, bowed toward the altar, and paused to dip their fingertips into the font of holy water and cross themselves. A video camera would click on as one of the retired sisters adjusted the closed-circuit video image so that the nuns who could not walk the short distance to the chapel could participate in prayer with the community. At 6:40 a.m. one of the sister's voices would break the chapel's silence as the nuns began morning prayers. Just before 7:00 the priest would emerge in the hallway and the sound of shoes moving toward the chapel increased again as the church filled with those who had made their morning prayers alone. Figure 1.2 depicts the chapel just before Mass.

After Mass, as the nuns flowed out of the stained-glass chapel doors into the hallway to the dining room for breakfast, the hush of prayer would balloon into warm chatter, hugs, greetings, and gentle embraces. Later some would return to the chapel for evening prayer, mirroring the morning ritual. Others would gather in small groups of four to eight in rooms throughout the convent with evening prayer books open on their laps. In the time between prayer time and

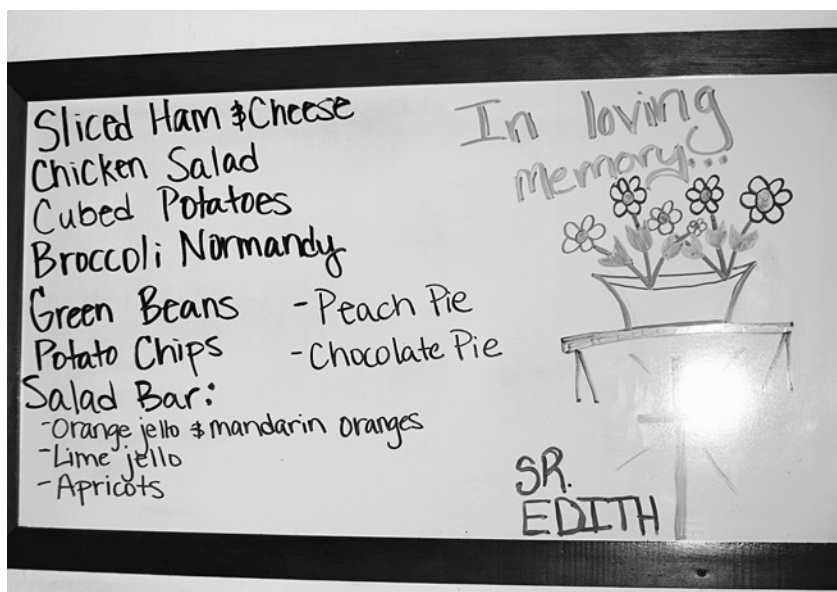


FIG. 1.3 A whiteboard in the dining hall. (Photo by the author)

mealtime the nuns would work or, if they could not, would pray or visit their elderly peers.

When sisters returned to the motherhouse for retirement, they often took up small duties in the convent, such as monitoring the front door for visitors or answering the phone. I witnessed sisters collaborating to find a job for a newly retired sister who seemed emotionally down or aimless upon returning. For example, one recently retired sister was asked if she could help accompany sisters to doctors' appointments; another was asked to help sort the mail. More than once I overheard sisters collaborating to find a need in the convent community so that they could ask a newly retired sister to help with it. They knew that having a way to be of service in the convent would provide meaning and structure for their newly retired sisters.

Meals were served in a large dining room in the heart of the main building. Until the last decade or so, the nuns had staffed the kitchen themselves, doing the cooking, cleaning, baking, and planning. By the time I arrived in 2008, only a few nuns worked in the kitchen and local women were employed in a number of staff positions. Before each meal, the sisters queued up in the hallway outside the industrial kitchen. Meals were served in a cafeteria-style buffet. At the entrance to the food line there was a whiteboard (shown in fig. 1.3) listing the menu and, often, decorated with a quote, a drawing, or an encouragement of some sort.

The nuns would collect their trays, silverware, and napkins and serve themselves fried chicken, barley soup, or beef brisket, with potatoes, corn, and steamed vegetables. The salad bar often had lettuce, tomatoes, and Jell-O salad. Dessert was pie, puddings, or cookies and fruit.

During the meals the nuns were warm, almost boisterous. In my first few weeks at the convent, I was taken aback by the sociality. I eventually learned that for the sisters, God existed in the chatter of the cafeteria as much as in the hush of the chapel. A few months into my time at the convent, a group of sisters told me the story of Saint Francis, founder of the Franciscans, and Juniper, one of Saint Francis's original followers. In the story, Saint Francis had suggested he and Juniper give a sermon. They went into town and casually, kindly, greeted people and spoke with them, then headed back home. Juniper said to Francis, "Holy Father, I thought we were going to give a sermon," and Saint Francis answered, "We did." The nuns followed Saint Francis's model, understanding that every interaction—even socializing over lunch or walking through town—was as sacred as any other. Speaking to a friend over lunch was understood to be as profound an expression of devotion as prayer. To build on Agamben's argument that a convent's strict schedule represents a sanctification by means of time, the nuns' post-Vatican II attitude toward sociality, which was no longer strictly regulated, could be seen as a *sanctification by means of presence*. Every action or interaction was intended to be infused with the model they saw in Christ and Saint Francis. To interact with goodwill, kindness, and generosity was to sanctify each interaction with divine love. Part of this process of sanctification through presence involved putting aside one's own desires in order to be fully present to another human. We will explore this process in chapter 7.

The lively sociality I experienced in the cafeteria, where the sisters saw themselves following Saint Francis as they cultivated the presence of God through generous interaction with others, contrasts with the ritual silence seen in many contemplative communities—such as those Paula Pryce (2019) studies in her work in the United States—where silence is seen as an agent of transformation. For the Franciscan sisters I lived with, it was through the difficult work of putting aside the ego or self while being present with others that allowed them to sanctify social interaction, to cultivate God's presence through social interaction.

The nuns strived to follow Saint Francis's model of spirituality by embodying compassion, kindness, and love while remaining highly engaged in the social world. In a lecture in the convent about Saint Clare (one of Saint Francis's first followers and the founder of her own monastic order), one of the nuns, echoing a famous quote by Saint Teresa of Avila, reminded her peers, "Jesus has no hands, no arms, no legs, so we must be his arms and legs and do his work. We must dress and act in ways that allow people to see Jesus." Humble engagement

in the world was one way to do God's work: to emphasize compassion, peace, and goodness.

The Infirmary

The infirmary wing of the convent had been renovated to resemble a medical institution. It was open to the rest of the convent so that one could walk directly from the motherhouse up steps holding a polished wood banister adorned with inlaid flowers into the three-story wing. An elevator, large enough to hold a wheeled bed, was installed to provide additional access to the infirmary floors. Each floor had a nurse's station and an industrial medical bathroom with a trough-like tub equipped for bathing sisters who could no longer move their bodies in and out of a bath or shower. Across from the nurses' station was a brightly lit dining room with windows overlooking the lush convent grounds. Here the sisters who could still feed themselves gathered for midday and evening meals.

Although the convent infirmary looked medically sterile, with plastic-treated tablecloths, pitchers of water, and nurses in scrubs, it was immediately clear to me that this was no hospital infirmary. There were some lingering smells of latex gloves, cleaning solutions, and bodily fluids, but more noticeable were smells of life: the warmth of beef stew still lingering from dinner and the smells of quilts, books, and flowers.

Each door opened to a small room that held a twin hospital bed, a chair, and a TV on a bookshelf. Some of the sisters sat in armchairs, watching television. Others were reading or napping. Some were in bed. A few waved. One sister, stiff on her bed, moaned and moaned. A few, in wheelchairs, stared blankly out the window.

As I met the nuns, the contrast with other medical facilities I had seen became heightened. Sister Betsy, whom we encountered at the beginning of this chapter, was one of the first people I met in the infirmary. She spent most of her time sitting, slumped a bit to one side, her soft body spilling over the chair because her back no longer held her upright. Her room was next to the elevator. Her days were punctuated by the ding of the elevator announcing itself on one side of her and her neighbor, Sister Esther, moaning on the other side. When one of the nuns, Sister Mary, tapped on Sister Betsy's door to introduce me, Sister Betsy struggled to turn her body toward us in her chair. One shoulder sagged much lower than the other and the pale flesh on her forearm gathered on the chair where her arm rested. As we walked into her room, Sister Betsy's face lit up; she met us with a gleaming smile and warm blue eyes. Sister Mary bent down, grasping the arm of the chair to steady herself and wrapped her arms around Sister Betsy. She introduced me, saying, "this is Anna, our visitor." Before even asking why I was there or allowing me to explain myself, Sister

Betsy grabbed my hand in her warm palms and enveloped me in her smile. “Welcome, welcome!” she said, gesturing to me to pull up the one extra chair in the room and sit down.

The only similarities between this infirmary and other medical institutions I had seen were physical, not social or interactional. The patterns of interaction were distinct from what I had observed in other nursing homes and assisted living communities. As visitors passed by rooms or entered to visit, there was no hesitation before they entered. Even the sisters’ attitudes seemed distinct. There was no fear in Sister Betsy’s eyes. She, like almost every person I met, did not wait for me to touch her, to advance. She held me, touched me, welcomed me with her body. Even though her body was ill—chronically so and deteriorating—her way of being in her body was confident, warm, and unashamed.

While I felt the difference in the convent infirmary immediately, it has taken me years to understand the habitual practices that created it. This book seeks to share what I have learned about why aging in the convent is unique. The following chapters begin to unpack the puzzle of not only why Catholic sisters seem to experience fewer chronic conditions as they age but also why women like Sister Betsy—who live in constant chronic pain and can no longer walk, work, or even leave their room in the infirmary—seem to experience each day with remarkable peace and joy, meeting each new person with warmth and kindness. This book is as much about the puzzle of how the nuns maintain well-being as it is about what well-being means to them, and how the culture of the convent comes to shape this process.